



Governor Christie Receives Education Transformation Task Force Report Outlining Plan to Empower Teachers and Schools

Report Recommends 428 Regulatory and 46 Statutory Changes to Ease the Regulatory Burden on Schools Along with Concrete Steps to Strengthen the State's Accountability System

For Immediate Release

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Trenton, NJ - Governor Chris Christie praised the final report of the Education Transformation Task Force today as a major step forward in empowering teachers and schools to better serve and educate New Jersey's students. The report recommends 428 regulatory and 46 statutory changes to give teachers, principals and superintendents the autonomy they need to help all students learn and to create a culture that focuses on student outcomes rather than compliance with regulations. In addition, the Task Force report addresses additional steps to strengthen the state's new school accountability system developed by the Department of Education earlier this year in order to hold all educators accountable for results. Taken together, these changes would create greater freedoms for successful schools and educators to craft their own path for success while being more prescriptive when schools persistently fail. Governor Christie has charged Commissioner Chris Cerf with reviewing the recommendations and pursuing regulatory changes through the State Board of Education this year where appropriate.

"This report creates a pathway to allow teachers to do what they do best - teach. I have long believed that we cannot regulate our way to better outcomes, and that the way to improve our schools is to give our educators the freedom they need to innovate and be successful and then hold them accountable for results," said Governor Christie. "When schools don't succeed, we have an obligation to be impatient and to turn around or close failing schools. This report is an important step in the right direction to find the appropriate balance between empowerment and accountability."

The Task Force report identified two overarching problems with the culture of overregulation that currently exists for New Jersey schools. First, a number of bureaucratic regulations stifle innovation at the local level and redirect the focus of administrators and educators away from their primary responsibility - student learning. Second, a culture of overregulation leads districts to equate regulatory compliance with success, rather than with what really matters - increasing student achievement.

"Time is the most valuable resource that our educators and administrators have. While every regulation is based on good intentions, in the aggregate they take too much time away from what we care most about - teaching and learning," said Commissioner Cerf. "This report makes some common sense suggestions to move our schools from organizations built to 'comply' to ones built to 'educate.'"

The Task Force was commissioned by Governor Christie to take an unflinching and candid look at how well New Jersey's education system was meeting its primary goal of helping all students graduate from high school ready for college and career. Its two basic tasks were to examine ways to eliminate burdensome laws so that New Jersey's educators have the freedom they need to employ the best strategies in the classroom, and to review statewide accountability systems, including the state's Quality Single Accountability Continuum (QSAC) and federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law.

On September 12, 2011, the Task Force submitted an initial report presenting the outline of a new school accountability system for New Jersey and proposed 45 initial recommendations to reduce the regulatory burden on schools. The Department of Education used the Task Force's accountability recommendations to form the basis of its No Child Left Behind (NCLB) waiver application, which was granted by the US Department of Education in February. (<http://www.nj.gov/governor/news/news/552012/approved/20120209b.html>)

In fulfilling its mission, the Task Force held public meetings and focus groups to solicit input from hundreds of educators, administrators and other stakeholders, and today presented a final report containing three sets of recommendations to the Governor:

1. Proposed changes to the regulatory code

The Task Force reviewed over 3,000 pages of regulations and statutes governing New Jersey's schools to propose changes that will ease the regulatory burden on educators, administrators, schools and districts. These recommendations fall into two categories.

First, the Task Force addressed overly bureaucratic regulations that distract educators from what matters most – student learning, fiscal integrity, and student health and safety. These changes will:

- **Reduce more than a dozen reporting requirements that are duplicative or unnecessary.** For example – eliminating reports that are important but already collected elsewhere, including statistical reports on Career and Technical Education and annual reports on student conduct, and eliminating unnecessary bureaucratic oversight such as the requirement that the Commissioner of Education approve the form that districts use to collect student health information.
- **Remove overly-bureaucratic rules and regulations that limit the ability of districts to spend funds in ways aligned with student achievement.** For example – giving districts flexibility to determine staffing needs, rather than requiring one janitor for every 17,500 square feet of space; no longer regulating the kind of printing paper that districts can use; no longer requiring districts to keep student phone numbers for 100 years; and encouraging electronic record keeping. Because of the 2 percent levy cap in statute, a mechanism already exists to constrain excessive spending, and districts should be able to align funds to student outcomes in the manner that best suits their needs, rather than by decrees from Trenton.

Second, the Task Force addressed regulations that stifle educator innovation and autonomy. These changes will:

- **Empower superintendents and school leaders to develop meaningful, customized professional development plans that focus on quality, rather than time alone.** For example: the "100 hour rule" requires teachers to complete 100 hours of professional development every five years, which has turned from a noble intent to a compliance checklist filled with activities with little impact on student achievement. Instead, the Task Force recommends empowering local leaders to develop customized professional development plans focused not merely on the time spent, but rather on the relevance of the professional development activities related to the needs of the individual teacher. This will help teachers to participate in job-embedded, collaborative, and student achievement-focused activities to improve their practice. Through the state's new principal evaluation pilot programs, principals will be evaluated based on the quality and implementation of these professional development plans.
- **Increase the opportunities for districts to explore innovative programs.** For example – enabling "opt-in" single-sex classrooms, consistent with federal and state law, and expanding the use of distance and online learning programs for long-term student absences.
- **Increase the flexibility of superintendents and school leaders to hire high-quality teachers and other educators.** These recommendations will broaden the pool of high-quality candidates, especially for hard-to-staff positions. For example, the recommendations will make it easier for districts to hire Career and Technical Education teachers with deep, hands-on experience in the field, will expand the pool of experienced and qualified substitute teachers while easing the constraints of districts to implement sustainable staffing plans, and will allow the Commissioner to approve alternative route programs for areas with documented teacher shortages.
- **Increase the flexibility of districts to operate preschool programs or contract with outside providers.** For example - allowing districts to negotiate their own contracts with outside preschool providers rather than solely using contracts mandated by the New Jersey Department of Education.
- **Eliminate unnecessary bureaucracy that stifles innovation and effective practice.** For example - the professional development planning process for teachers is now overseen by four bureaucratic levels of oversight. The local Professional Development Committee develops professional development plans for teachers, which is reviewed by the district board of education, the county professional development board, and then the Professional Teaching Standards Board which advises the Commissioner. Teacher professional development is too important to bog it down in such a bureaucratic process, and so the recommendations would develop a system of local control and accountability where plans are developed at the school level and overseen by the Superintendent.

2. Proposed changes to statutes

The Task Force recommended 46 changes to statute that would, among other things, help districts focus on fiscal restraint and student learning. These proposals, which would require legislative approval, include:

- Facilitating district mergers and shared service agreements.
- Reforming the seniority system which prevents schools from considering teacher effectiveness when conducting reductions in force.
- Passing the Opportunity Scholarship Act to provide students in struggling schools with an opportunity to enroll in a school that better fits their needs.

- Strengthening innovation and accountability for charter schools through the Charter School Reform Act.
- Allowing school districts to opt out of the civil service system.
- Utilizing average daily enrollment to calculate school aid.

3. Considerations to improve accountability for results

Central to the final Task Force report is the connection between empowerment and accountability – that the state should give additional flexibility to educators to be successful but should set a high bar for accountability and develop prescriptive interventions when schools persistently fail.

Earlier this year, the Department of Education announced the list of the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools in the state (Priority Schools) that will receive intensive state intervention in the fall as part of its new school accountability system.

To strengthen this accountability system, the Task Force recommends the Department consider three areas to strengthen accountability:

- **Create a unified accountability system** – the Department should develop and propose an alternative to QSAC to make it school-based in focus and consistent with the new NCLB framework.
- **Consider more intensive interventions** for Priority and Focus Schools that prove unwilling or unable to turn around after several years of state support.
- **Develop a new process for returning state-operated districts to local control** in a manner that maintains stability and ensures ongoing state support for schools that are persistently failing.

Governor Christie has charged Commissioner Chris Cerf with reviewing and considering these recommendations on behalf of the Governor and the Department of Education. Where appropriate, the Commissioner will pursue regulatory changes through the State Board of Education, which will allow for additional input from stakeholders and the education community. Similarly, the Governor looks forward to working with the Legislature to pursue legislative reform where appropriate.

The Education Transformation Task Force was chaired by Department of Education Chief of Staff David C. Hesper (Belle Mead, Somerset) and its membership includes: Community Education Resource Network co-founder and Director Angel Cordero (Camden, Camden); Thomas Jefferson Middle School (Teaneck) Principal Angela R. Davis (New Milford, Bergen); retired Kearny School Superintendent Frank Digesere (Toms River, Ocean); Pittsgrove Township Middle School teacher Linda DuBois (Pittsgrove, Salem); Elizabeth Board of Education Assistant Secretary Donald Edwards Goncalves (Elizabeth, Union); special education expert and ECLC of New Jersey Executive Director Bruce Litinger (Short Hills, Essex); and Seton Hall University Department of Education Leadership, Management and Policy Chair Michael J. Osnato, Ed.D. (Westwood, Bergen).

A copy of the Task Force report can be found [here](#).